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Chapter 1

Introduction – What is International Relations Theory?

More than ever, our lives are shaped by the world in which we live and the people, or groups of people, that surround us. We have formed boundaries, cultures, and communities that define what we call nations. The relationship of nations and their behavior toward one another—international relations—is what makes up our human history.

Scholars throughout history have studied the human condition—assessing, evaluating, and even predicting patterns of behavior—using and developing various theories. A **theory** is a proposition, or set of propositions, that tries to analyze, explain or predict something. An **international relations theory**, then, is defined as a set of principles and guidelines used to analyze both world events and relations between states. International relations scholars often interchange various terms with theory, such as *paradigm*, *model*, *image*, or *perspective*. Whatever the words, the important thing to remember is that theories help to assess past and present conditions and, in turn, provide a reasonable basis for predicting future trends.

The development of international relations theory could be compared to a laboratory experiment. Scientists use their knowledge of specific elements and their properties to predict how they might behave in various combinations and under specific conditions, as well as to produce a certain reaction or outcome. Theories about international relations are formed in a similar way. In this case, though, the laboratory is the international system as a whole, and we must speculate about the behavior of the states and individuals within it.

Theories of international relations can be grouped into two broad categories: explanatory theories and prescriptive theories. As the name implies, **explanatory theories** try to explain events and circumstances. They are based on description and evaluation of past events, conditions, and patterns of behavior. Scholars form a theory based on how nations have acted and interacted in the past in order to predict what their future behavior may be. For example, many theorists have studied past wars, trying to find certain patterns of behavior that may tell them why war is such a perennial problem in international relations. One popular international relations theory, realism, can be considered an explanatory theory.

Prescriptive theories, also referred to as normative theories, do not discount the value of historical experience but also incorporate moral principles and the setting of goals. A **prescriptive theory** is a set of principles or guidelines that contain overt value judgments about how the world ought to be rather than how the world actually is. Prescriptive theory often involves the development of standards or principles for the conduct of international relations. Based on both past and contemporary conditions and patterns, theories prescribe or suggest a particular course of action, policy, or doctrine. This prescription is designed to improve and enhance relations between states within the international system. Peace studies is an example of this category of prescriptive theories. Many theories, such as liberalism, class system theory, and postmodernism, actually cross over, incorporating both the explanatory and prescriptive methods.

Finally, it is important to note that a theory may be correct, incorrect, or even partially correct. In the end, it is up to individual students to decide for themselves which theory or theories provide the most accurate and useful guidelines for understanding the course of global politics.

How Is International Relations Theory Formed?

We have discussed what international relations theory is; now let us address the question of how it is formed. In developing a theory of international relations, social scientists and scholars of world affairs consider a number of factors. They do not simply look at distinct, isolated events

that have occurred over the course of history. They also examine the various elements that acted as the driving force of the crises. These elements provide important clues in discovering how a crisis originated. The nature of the states and system when not in crisis can serve as a starting point for the investigation. That is, the specific details of a crisis lose their meaning if we do not know what led up to the event and what happened afterwards.

Scholars begin with what is called a **hypothesis**. A hypothesis is essentially an educated guess or proposition about how or why something—an event or specific set of conditions—occurred. A hypothesis must, however, have a certain degree of probability; if one does not believe something to be possible, there is no point in determining its likelihood.

The hypothesis is then put to the test using certain methods. The methodology commonly employed in the development of international relations theory consists of several components, used either singly or in combination: analysis of historical events, conditions, or progressions; reasoned deduction based on the facts or evidence; and assessment of quantitative data.

By using these techniques, scholars and students of international relations come up with theories about the behavior and interaction of states. These theories might be explained through case studies. A **case study** uses a specific event, set of circumstances, or period of time to introduce and/or exemplify the key concepts of a given theory. A **concept** is an idea, thought, or notion derived from the theory.

There can be no absolutes in theorizing about international relations, particularly given the vaguaries and random actions that can, and do, occur in human interaction. Unlike many stable, constant elements of a laboratory experiment—whether solids, gases, or liquids—the world is an ever-changing environment. A theory of international relations may well be relevant and applicable during a specific period of history with a specific set of circumstances. New theories, however, must be periodically adapted and applied to our changing environment. Quite apart from simply invalidating the "old" theory, this continuous theoretical growth instead speaks to the exciting, even limitless, possibilities for examining, evaluating, and developing international relations theory.

Levels of Analysis: A Method for Studying International Relations Theory

One apparently lasting methodology for studying international relations theory is what is known as the levels of analysis. Developed originally in the 1950s by Kenneth Waltz, **levels of analysis** is exactly what it says—a method for examining international relations theory based on three different "units of measure," in purely scientific terms, or "levels." These levels are—from broad to narrow in scope—system level, state level, and individual level. That is, each theory or set of theories associated with a given level emphasizes the characteristics, conditions, and confines of that particular level in understanding and explaining world events and relations between states.¹

Different levels focus on different questions. The system level of analysis looks at the international environment and how that shapes the pattern of interaction between countries. At the system level of analysis, questions center on how the distribution of military and economic power among states affects the course of international relations and how the global political environment affects the behavior of states. The second level, the state level of analysis, examines how states make foreign policy. This level asks two fundamental questions: First, are some types of governments more prone to war than others?

Second, does the competition for influence over policy making between interest groups and within bureaucracies have a significant impact on a state's foreign policy? Finally, individual-level analyses center on whether and how the characteristics, values, and perspectives of individual leaders affect their foreign policy decisions.

The levels of analysis concept is a tool to assist us in our examination of international relations. It helps us understand that international politics is the result of numerous sources. Each level features a different view of the event or events we are examining. It is like taking a picture from different distances. The system-level approach will give you a sense of the broad features of

the environment and provide the widest perspective, but will give very little detail of the individual parts. The state level can be compared to a photograph taken from several steps closer.

We can now distinguish the objects in the photograph, though specific details remain unclear. The individual level provides the closest look at our subject, offering terrific detail but eliminating the perspective provided by the broader views. Like the different photographs, all three levels of analysis have unique value. Together they provide the most accurate and complete understanding of international relations.

For an international relations example, we see that the origins of the Cold War cannot be analyzed properly without the proper context—the role of certain key individual leaders, the types of countries involved, and the way the structure of the international system shaped or constrained the behavior of the United States and the Soviet Union. This provides perspective on the causes and ramifications of the event itself.

At the beginning of the Cold War, many countries were still suffering from the effects of World War II. Great Britain was weak from the effort of defeating Nazi Germany, and all three of the traditional European powers—Great Britain, France, and Germany—were trying to rebuild from the rubble of countless battles and bombings. Indeed, after the United States dropped the first two atomic bombs on Japan in 1945, all of the former Axis powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan) who had initiated World War II had been defeated.

Only two nations at this time were strong enough to take leading roles on the international stage: the United States and the Soviet Union. But the styles of government in these two states were at opposite ends of the political spectrum and were not at all compatible. In the democratic United States, individual rights were and are valued and protected. Checks and balances within the government and on the government ensure these individual freedoms, yet provide a structure for national self-determination. Reliance on capitalist economic principles with free trade and open markets both helps to support American-style democracy and is supported by the democratic process.

The communist government of the Soviet Union emphasized collective rights over individual rights and freedoms. Power flowed from the center of the political structure and was dictatorial in nature, particularly under the rule of Joseph Stalin in the early Cold War years. Along with this centralized political authority came centralized economic planning. That is, the government owns the "means of production"—from factories and farms to tools and other equipment. Essentially, everyone in the Soviet Union was an employee of the state, and private ownership was kept to a bare minimum.

So, in the broadest sense, we see that the world was in a very delicate position at the beginning of the Cold War. The traditional European powers of Great Britain, France, and Germany were recovering from the damage of World War II. Only the United States and the Soviet Union were powerful enough to influence world politics. The problem lay in the extreme differences of the two nations. Each state wanted to channel the course of international politics in its own direction and rebuild the world in its own image. For the Soviet Union, that image was communist. For the United States, the image was democratic capitalism. These differences and the power vacuum created by the weakness of the other states in the international system contributed to the competition and confrontation of the United States and Soviet Union.

In addition to the weakness of the system and the confrontational relationship between the two countries, we might also take a step closer and speculate about the psychological motivations of individual leaders. With Joseph Stalin as head of the Soviet Union during this period, his need for absolute authority, as well as his insecurities and ruthlessness, shaped both his decisions and Soviet foreign policy. These tendencies, combined with Stalin's documented fear of the West, compounded—and was compounded by—the shaky condition of the international system and the inevitable friction between the two competing political-economic systems.

On the American side, the fact that Harry Truman quite suddenly became president of the United States upon the death of Franklin Roosevelt made him feel somewhat anxious about the need to appear decisive and in control. His state of mind with respect to the Soviet Union is best described in his own words: "If the Soviets do not wish to join us, they could go to Hell." This

attitude may have exacerbated hostility between the two nations and made cooperation much less likely in the post-World War II environment.

Let us now reexamine our example on the origins of the Cold War within the levels of analysis framework. On a system level, the United States and the Soviet Union were the two most powerful states left standing in the post-war world. The global situation was in turmoil. Formerly strong nations were helpless in the wake of a massive war effort.

So, we have two strong powers dominating the international system. Looking at the situation from a state-level perspective, conflict between the democratic United States and the communist Soviet Union is not surprising. The countries had radically different political and economic structures with neither, at that point, willing to compromise.

Finally, on an individual level, there was a serious mistrust on the part of both President Truman and Soviet leader Stalin. There was an almost cyclical reinforcement between these different levels of analysis and interaction. Competition between the United States and the Soviet Union was natural because of their differences. This competition reinforced those differences and fed the fears and wariness of the individual leaders.

Overall, we see that there are points to be made at each level of analysis with respect to this example. Let us now examine the specifics of each level—system, state, and individual—and the theories of international relations that go along with them.

System Level

Beginning with the broadest method, the theories associated with **system-level analysis**—realist, liberal, class system, and, to a lesser extent, postmodernism—all tend to suggest that relations between states can be explained by factors that influence the system as a whole and by the characteristics and proclivities of the system itself. Allocation of power among states or groups of states, economic interdependence, and distribution of wealth are some of the general factors used in system-level analysis. The dynamic created both within and by the system then shapes the relations of states and individuals.

For example, one type of system-level theory is known as the realist school of thought. Realist theory emphasizes that the distribution of power in the international system shapes the behavior of the states within it. Some realists focus on the structure of the international system and the fact that there is no international authority to achieve and maintain global peace and stability among nations. Realists call this condition—the absence of an overarching government in the system— anarchy. States, then, are forced to be self-reliant and use their own power—or establish a mutually beneficial alliance structure with other states—to preserve their independence. Power—its uneven distribution in the system and the quest of states for it—shapes the behavior of nations and alliances.

The first scholar to remark on the importance of power and shifts in power was the Greek historian Thucydides, in 461 B.C. Using the rivalry between the city-states of Athens and Sparta as his case study, Thucydides found not only that uneven rates of development and levels of power create tension between nations but that generally "strong states do what they have the power to do and weak states accept what they must." And with no international government in place to preserve law and order, as well as the rights of the weak, it is understandable that power—its acquisition and preservation—becomes an important commodity.

If the realists are generally pessimistic in their view of power and the anarchic nature of the international system, a second group of theorists, whom we shall call the liberals, take a somewhat brighter view. Though liberals, like realists, accept that the world is anarchic, they also suggest that this condition is not static and the system can be changed. Liberals base this assumption on the notion that even in the absence of an overarching government in the international system, a harmony of interests does exist among nations. This implies that the incentive to cooperate with one another is stronger than the incentive for conflict. Creating international organizations and international law can build on these bonds and further promote good relations between states.

Liberals who advocate this kind of institutional approach—that is, the creation of international political organizations and international law—are known as liberal institutionalists (sometimes referred to as idealists). Proponents of this theory are looking to establish an international society in which hostility and mistrust no longer characterize relations among states. Selfishness is replaced by mutual respect and understanding.

Despite their faith in the ability of these organizations and the rule of law to help avoid conflict, liberal institutionalists acknowledge that some friction within the system is inevitable. At these times, states can come together under what they call collective security. The term *collective security* suggests that if all states agree to join together to defend the independence of every state in the international community, then their collective ability to rebuff the aggression of a single state is greatly enhanced. Similar to the old adage about safety in numbers, collective security provides for the safety and security of its members.

According to liberal institutionalists, cooperation and collective security can be established through the use of international organizations. Thus liberal institutionalists are proponents of international organizations such as the United Nations which focus on enhancing cooperation and stability. These organizations are designed to preserve and enforce specific rules and norms in global politics. Economic liberals, on the other hand, emphasize the importance of other transnational actors, such as multinational corporations (MNCs). MNCs build bonds between nations based on economics and trade. Economic liberals contend that by expanding international economic ties, all nations will have a stake in preserving peace and promoting stability. In short, while the institutional and economic branches of liberalism emphasize different mechanisms and actors, they both focus on the common goal of building international cooperation.

The third theory in our presentation of system-level analyses is based primarily on an economic foundation. Class system theory suggests that the distribution of wealth within the international system shapes the system itself. Among class system theorists, it is generally accepted that this shape is capitalist. In the world capitalist system, wealthy people and wealthy countries mold global affairs to their own benefit. This perpetuates a cycle of dependency among poor and weak states.

Karl Marx and V. I. Lenin were perhaps the best known advocates of this theory. They contended that this exploitation crossed state boundaries and would eventually unite the working class, or proletariat, in an international revolution against imperialist domination. Conflict, then, occurs primarily on an economic basis—the global exploitation of the poor by the wealthy and by the imperialist force of capitalism.

The final system-level theory is labeled postmodernism. This paradigm includes a rather diverse array of theories that have certain key assumptions in common. Postmodernism focuses primarily on the importance of ideas and culture in shaping our understanding of international politics. Postmodernists argue that traditional theories of international relations are inherently subjective and merely reflect the biases and motivations of the people who created the theories in the first place. Many postmodernists argue that it is impossible to construct an objective or unbiased theory of international relations and therefore focus on how our understanding of international relations is shaped by our beliefs and social identities.

State Level

State-level analysis brings the examination of relations between states and the formulation of international relations theory a step closer. State level emphasizes the nature and characteristics of individual states in evaluating the dynamics of global politics and the international system. As we see in our example on the origins of the Cold War, the fundamental differences between communist states and capitalist democracies can be a source of tension.

Both of the two major state-level theories that we will discuss in this book— political regime theory and decision-making process theory—emphasize the domestic factors of nations in their international behavior. These factors include the type of government and how it operates, level of

citizen participation, sense of popular well-being, and adaptability of the state to both internal and external pressures and changes.

In political regime theory, the central question is whether the type of government of a nation has an impact on that nation's foreign policy. More specifically, we might ask, are authoritarian regimes more prone to conflict or war than democracies?

Francis Fukuyama argues that different types of governments do behave differently and that democracies are, indeed, less likely to go to war than authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. He generally attributes this to the fact that the political ideals forming the basis of democracies incorporate a great respect for human rights, the value of international law, and the resolution of conflict through negotiation. Since democratic leaders must answer to a popular mandate, the foreign policy of democratic countries conforms to these principles as closely as possible.

The other state-level theory presented, decision-making process theory, emphasizes not the type of government but the characteristics of the bureaucratic machine itself. That is, how do governments make foreign policy and how does that, in turn, affect foreign policy?

Process theorists contend that decisions are quite often the result of compromise between competing factions or groups within the government bureaucracy. An example might be the influence of the U.S. military-industrial complex on companies that specialize in manufacturing military hardware and the influence branches of the military have over the country's defense and foreign policy. The role of these factions in the government and the competition between them are important contributing factors to the politics of the state.

Individual Level

The third and final level of analysis takes a look at the role of the individual in society. **Individual level** approaches to understanding international politics emphasize the common characteristics of all individuals, often referred to as "human nature," or they look for explanations based on the impact that particular individuals have on the foreign policy of a given state.

Individual-level explanations examine the human actor in several different ways. The first approach looks at the base characteristics of human nature in general. According to Thomas Hobbes, it is the nature of the individual, which is naturally insecure and aggressive, that shapes, defines, and characterizes society and government. The second analyzes the motives, principles, and preconceptions of individuals. Thomas Carlyle once said, "The history of the world is but the biography of great men." This notion suggests that the perceptions, misperceptions, and behavior of individual leaders can have a dramatic impact on the actions of a state. These actions then create ripples through the international system as a whole.

Using these guidelines, this study will examine the individual level of international-relations analysis in terms of three theoretical treatments: human nature, the nature of the individual, and the mitigation of human aggression. The articles in this section offer a range of viewpoints. From pessimists, such as Thomas Hobbes, one is left with the impression that people are by nature aggressive and driven in a quest for power. Only strong governments, Hobbes suggests, can mitigate these tendencies and preserve domestic and international stability.

An alternate approach addresses the ability of a single leader or personality to shape the actions of a nation. In so doing, that individual is able to alter the course of political interaction on a global scale. The rise and fall of Adolf Hitler is one of the most vivid contemporary examples of such a leader, but he is certainly not alone. From George Washington to Ronald Reagan, from Lenin to Mikhail Gorbachev, individuals have made, and no doubt will continue to make, their marks on the international system.

Finally, an optimistic perspective of the individual is set forth in the last section. As part of the relatively new field of peace studies, Arthur Stein characterizes humans as potentially "good" and capable of positively transforming individuals, societies, and the world in general. The theory of peace studies more broadly focuses on building harmonious relations among individuals and states. It asserts that if certain prescriptions are followed, a more peaceful and stable world may be created. Individual enlightenment, accordingly, is the key.

It is important to understand that Waltz's three levels of analysis for international relations theory differ not in their coverage but in their emphasis. No single level by itself can provide a complete explanation of events and changes in world politics. Each level organizes the facts in its own particular fashion, and each level focuses on different facts. Only by examining what scholars and proponents of all three levels have said about individuals and their societies as well as the global environment can we hope to create a more complete picture of our world and our future.

The second reading in this chapter, by Stephen Walt, presents a very insightful evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the four predominant system-level paradigms of international relations theory. It is important for readers to note that in some cases, the names of the theories differ from those used in this text. For example, Walt uses the term "radical theory" to describe what this book refers to as class system theory (Chapter 4). There are two explanations for this confusion. The first is that international relations scholars are stubborn academics and cannot seem to agree on a common label for the different paradigms. The second and more profound reason is that international relations theory is a dynamic field of study. Scholars constantly devise new theories, and even the traditional theories continue to evolve and adjust to fill in theoretical gaps or respond to changes in global affairs. To limit the confusion, each chapter begins by identifying the alternative labels for every paradigm that is covered in this text.

One final note: The articles in this book have been organized by level of analysis— system, state, and individual, in that order. This methodology is an analytical tool used to clarify and order our exploration of the different dimensions of international relations theory. However, students should be aware that many of the theorists presented in this volume incorporate some of the basic assumptions of more than one level of analysis. For example, Hans Morganthau, a realist, is categorized as a system-level theorist even though he had strong views about human nature (individual level) and the role of governments (state level) in shaping foreign policy. His overall emphasis, though, was primarily directed at the behavior of states as shaped by the international system. So again, it is a matter of emphasis rather than exclusivity that allows us to categorize theories according to the three levels of analysis.

Key Concepts

Case study uses a specific event, set of circumstances, or period of time to introduce and/or exemplify the key concepts of a given theory.

Concept is an idea, thought, or notion derived from a theory.

Explanatory theories try to explain events and circumstances. They are based on description and evaluation of past events, conditions, and patterns of behavior. Scholars form a theory based on how nations have acted and interacted in the past in order to predict what their future behavior might be.

Hypothesis is essentially an educated guess or proposition about how or why something—an event or specific set of conditions—occurred. A hypothesis must, however, have a certain degree of probability.

Individual-level analysis is an approach to understanding international relations that focuses on the role and impact of particular individuals, or looks for explanations based on "human nature," or common characteristics of all individuals.

International relations theory is a set of principles and guidelines used to analyze both world events and relations between states. Such theories help to assess past and present conditions and, in turn, provide a reasonable basis for predicting future trends.

Levels of analysis is a method for examining international relations theory based on three different perspectives or levels. These levels are, from broad to narrow in scope, system level, state level, and individual level. Each theory or set of theories associated with a given level emphasizes the characteristics, conditions, and confines of that particular level in understanding and explaining world events and relations between states.

Prescriptive theory is a set of principles and guidelines that contain overt value judgments about how the world ought to be rather than how the world actually is. Prescriptive theory often

involves the development of standards or principles for the conduct of international relations. Based on both past and contemporary conditions and patterns, these theories prescribe or suggest a particular course of action, policy, or doctrine. This prescription is designed to improve and enhance relations between states within the international system.

State-level analysis is an analytical approach to international relations that focuses on the domestic or internal causes of state actions. State-level theories attempt to explain international relations by emphasizing the internal workings of the state itself.

System-level analysis attempts to explain international relations by focusing on the manner in which the structure of the international system (global distribution of resources among states) shapes or constrains the actions of states. System-level theories contend that relations between states can be explained by factors that influence the system as a whole and by the characteristics and proclivities of the system itself.

Theory is a proposition or set of propositions that tries to analyze, explain, or predict something.

¹ Some works on international relations theory have identified as many as six levels of analysis: individual, roles, government, society, international relations, and the world system. See Bruce Russett and Harvey Starr's *World Politics: The Menu for Choice*, 4th edition (New York: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1992), pp. 11-17. For this textbook, Kenneth Waltz's original three levels provide students with a clearer, more basic framework for studying international relations theory.